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AUTHOR	Nitzke, Joseph
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ABSTRACT

Western Iowa Tech Community College (WITCC) is a public, comprehensive community college serving a six-county district in Northwest Iowa. The College offers more than 60 occupational programs and a wide variety of liberal arts transfer options, in addition to participating in community enhancement initiatives. The total population of the 6 counties served by WITCC is between 160,000 and 180,000. Five of the six counties are classified as rural, and two of these counties have industry clusters. The primary advantage of rural industry clusters is higher earnings than those outside the cluster. This study was designed to answer several questions about what WITCC might do to assist stakeholders in their economic development efforts. The author asked local entrepreneurs, bankers, elected officials, and development specialists (within the context of a focus group) a series of questions, including: (1) What should be the goals of rural economic development? (2) What do you think is the economic outlook for the area? and (3) What are some of the (or most important) factors that contribute in a positive way to developing the economy in the area? The author concludes that focus group participants provided clear direction for WITCC. Focus group script appended. (Contains 42 references.) (Author/NB)

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Rural Economic Development: Perspectives from the Heart

Focus Group Project

Joseph Nitzke

July 21, 2000

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Introduction

Western Iowa Tech Community College (WITCC) is a public, comprehensive community college serving a six-county district in northwest Iowa. Founded in 1966, the college offers more than 60 occupational programs and a wide variety of liberal arts transfer options. In addition, the college is an active participant in a number of initiatives directed to community enhancement.

Economic development is explicit in the college's mission statement, as well as in several goals of the current Strategic Plan. In the vocabulary of community colleges, economic development is often expressed in terms of developing a world class workforce, of providing training for new and existing workers, or of financial support for job creation within the WITCC district. On a continuing basis, the college provides training for business and industry and also provides funding to support new or expanding industries.

The total population of the six counties served by WITCC is between 160,000 and 180,000. Of the 15 community colleges in Iowa, the WITCC district ranks 6th largest in population density with 43.06 persons/square mile, according to 1990 census information [Iowa community college range: 109.79/square mile for Eastern Iowa Community College District to 17.61/square mile for Southwestern Community College). Of the six counties that the college serves, one is classed as metropolitan, and the other five are classed as rural. Of those rural counties, one is estimated to have modest population growth (Economic Research Service, 1998), while four have estimated population decline. All of the nonmetro counties are served by three or more banks (Collender et al., 1998); however, the changing nature of the banking structure will likely have its greatest impact on rural borrowers (Drabenstott, 1999). Two of the counties have "industry clusters," which are defined as a group of establishments located within close geographic proximity of one another, sharing either a common set of input needs or relying on each other as suppliers or customers (Gibbs & Bernat, RDP 12), while three of the counties do

not. The primary advantage of rural industry clusters is higher earnings (13 percent on average) than those outside the cluster. Finally, only one of the rural counties has been labeled "manufacturing-dependent" (Barkley, 1996).

The district is often referred to as part of either the Great Plains or the Heartland. The Heartland includes anywhere from nine to 11 states, extending west from the Mississippi. References to the Great Plains include a region which is economically diverse, though perhaps less so than other areas. The economy is bolstered by wheat, cattle, oil, coal mining, recreation, education, manufacturing, and service industries. Hence, the opportunities for development and employment vary greatly across the region.

This research study was designed to answer several questions about what WITCC might do to assist stakeholders in their economic development efforts. To answer that question, I investigated rural economic development to better understand it as it is perceived by those who practice it, including entrepreneurs, bankers, local elected officials, and development specialists. Using these local individuals as a resource, we asked the following questions:

1. How is rural economic development defined?
2. What distinguishes rural economic development from urban economic development?
3. What are the goals?
4. What are the processes that stakeholders have observed in economic development?
5. What are the barriers to that process?
6. What are possible solutions to those barriers?

Literature Review

Until recently, the rural economy and the farm economy were regarded as synonymous. A broad comparison of rural/nonmetropolitan demographics (Castle, 1998) shows that of the 48 contiguous states, 97 percent of the land area is rural, and farming occupies one-half of that land

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area. For those areas, farming and agricultural services provide less than 10 percent of the total nonmetropolitan employment.

Small towns, the locus of nonmetropolitan activity, traditionally equated economic development with agricultural progress or funding (Barkley, 1995). The farm crisis, especially during the last two decades of the 20th century, fueled speculation about the economic prospects of the Heartland (cf. Duncan, et al. 1996). Typical issues discussed include technological changes, aggressive marketing, narrowing profit margins, and farm policy. However, the farm-rural relationship has become an interlaced economic network where boundaries and identities are blurred, and rural communities continue to struggle to overcome a negative image as well as the realities of remoteness and population scarcity. Since 1980, rural areas have had weaker employment growth, compared to urban growth, and cities have become broad economic hubs. Even as recently as 1997, the absence of a "rural" policy has been questioned in economics journals (Freshwater,1997).

Noting a trend among developed countries to "abandon" farming and their rural roots, Blank (1999) predicted that America will outgrow its need for agriculture and will rely on other countries to import food, in effect foretelling the "end" of the American farm. Thus small-scale farming may be part of the proud past, and its decline marks a decline of political power for rural areas. What remains, according to Blank, is the attraction to the rural lifestyle.

A major shift that resulted from the farm crisis has been that economists and others (agricultural economists becoming rural economists) demonstrated a renewed interest in theorizing and developing models to accommodate the new realities of rural America. The emerging separate identities of *farm* vs. *rural* prompted a renewal of research on the rural economy as an entity in itself. With the definition of a "rural economy" comes the focus on rural economic development.

Barkley (1995) described a rural economy that appears stronger in some areas, cautioning that new jobs have been concentrated in roughly half of the counties and that those new jobs tend

to pay lower wages. This raises the question of whether rural economic growth is adding jobs or raising standards. Of the fifteen industries in which rural America added the most jobs from 1981 through 1992, fourteen paid wages below the national average (Drabenstott, 1995). On the other hand, eleven of the fifteen industries where rural jobs were lost paid wages above the national average.

Markley and McNamara (1995) noted that the variety of development strategies is complicated by the interaction of local conditions and the difficulty in evaluating the effectiveness of strategies within situation specific contexts. In addition to the need to find avenues to create a "critical mass," Kraybill and Weber (1995) predicted that rural development will be the responsibility of states and local communities, not the federal government. They proposed a model to address two policy issues, local economic development and public land management. In their view, the advantage is that local strategies are much better adapted to the tremendous diversity in rural America than those from the federal bureaucracy.

For some economists, the changing economic environment has prompted the development of complex statistical models to explain its effects, such as the ability of natural amenities to attract population (McGranahan, 1999, a model to show correlation; cf Kilkenny, 1999, a model to show Computable General Equilibrium of remoteness, dependence on natural resources, and low density).

Though rural employment experienced an upsurge in the late 1990's, rural leaders were concerned about maintaining access to capital to promote continued growth (Drabenstott & Meeker 1997). Rural communities with close ties to agriculture began focusing on diversifying their economic base, on raising capital to finance new businesses and alleviate a shortage of affordable housing, and on maintaining infrastructure, such as water, sewer, and in some cases public utilities. Fawson et al. (1998) identified underlying dynamics in county-level employment patterns when county employment is dominated by broadly defined industry categories.

Rural Capital

Castle (1998) delineated a rationale that assumes local autonomy over political and economic agendas as a means of enhancing understanding of population attributes, interdependence with urban and global conditions and their diverse natures. He encourages use of the concept of **rural capital**, which he defines in terms of *natural capital, man-created, human capital,* and *social capital.* His model allows for an expanded view of rural development in comparison to the earlier model by Kraybill and Weber (1995).

As one of several responses to Castle, Oakerson (1998, 632) placed greater emphasis on natural capital, adding that the difference between his and Castle's perspectives is evident in the "role natural capital preservation plays in cultural transmission" to recognize the dependence of rural economies on the use of natural resources. Kraybill (1998) agreed that the concept of social capital is useful in rural studies, and he enriched it by including material constraints, class divisions, and power relations. In particular, he pointed to the impact of the political economy and the effects of policy-making on rural areas.

Applicability

The concepts presented by Castle (1998, 622) provide a useful approach to categorize many of the issues that emerged in the focus group discussions.

> **Natural capital** [emphasis added] is that part of the natural environment that can contribute directly or indirectly to human satisfaction. It may be used in forestry or farming as a production input or to provide satisfaction in consumption by the provision of natural amenities…
>
> **Man-created capital** consists of extended-use items produced by humans where creation requires a sacrifice. It includes "software" as well as "hardware."

Human capital reflects investments in people that enhance their potential social contribution, consistent with the way it has been described by both Schultz (1961) and Becker (1964).

Social capital consists of those group arrangements that make individual actions more productive than they would be in its absence. Some may develop spontaneously and not be highly visible, but others are more obvious and formal. Common elements include a degree of mutual trust, the existence of reciprocity in some form, and a means for enforcing commitments. Ethnic background, cultural heritage, and shared aspirations all may affect the stock of social capital.

Castle cited Coleman's (1990) description of social capital as a variety of entities that comprise a social structure and facilitate certain actions of individuals within that structure. The concept of social capital has also been delineated by Putnam (1995), who has recently published a book describing changes in social behaviors (cf. Edwards & Foley, 1999).

Related Approaches

Though Timmer (1997) questioned the applicability of rigid models of economic development, he did look for avenues that recognize multiple models or complex models and multiple influences. Instead of the "positive political economy" paradigm which accounts for the rational, self-serving policy maker or bureaucrat within the institutional rule and the "normative political economy" paradigm of a benevolent dictator operating to maximize social welfare, Timmer suggested a "political economy" paradigm that incorporates a role for leadership, vision, negotiation skills, and abilities to build and use coalitions.

Kelsey (1998) looked at the influence of institutions (institutional economics) in describing the interactive effects in analyzing land use conflicts between farmers and their non-farming neighbors. He developed the concepts of interdependence, rules and property rights. He focused on interdependence because its consequences allow economic analysts to understand the

kinds of rules and institutions that have substantial impact on economic and behavior and can therefore determine effective policy alternatives. Recognizing interdependence and its implications helps economic analysis focus on and understand the types of rules and institutions which have the most influence on economic behavior, and thus identify policy alternatives. In addition to the conflicts arising from "joint-impact goods," the costs of transaction and exclusion, and the economies of scale, he also analyzed the impact on rules of events, such as the influx of urban people into rural areas.

Summary. The 1980's farm crisis stimulated academic attention to rural economies, and agricultural economists and others have since then formulated theoretical models to help us understand what is happening in rural America. Most useful to the present study is the conceptual framework provided by Castle (1998), in which rural capital is presented as a multi-dimensional concept comprised of four component capital types. I adopt Castle's framework to present the findings of this research.

Research Design

Western Iowa Tech Community College routinely collects information on the economic needs of the region which it serves. Data are collected informally, through media sources, program-related advisory groups comprised of community business persons, and personal relations with residents of the district, and formally, through attitude and marketing surveys. These activities yield useful information, but the unsystematic nature of informal methods and the presumptive nature of surveys limits their usefulness when the goal is to explore solutions to problems which are not well understood. The focus group method satisfies the exploratory intent of this research and avoids the short-comings of more routine data collection methods.

Methodological Approach: Focus Groups

Although the use of focus groups has recently increased in popularity, applications of the technique have evolved over the past 75 years. Perhaps the earliest use was by Bogardus (1926),

who used the method in developing his social distance scale for detecting racial bias. From the qualitative data yielded by his groups, Bogardus constructed the scale that is the basis of much quantitative efforts even today. The way Bogardus used them, focus groups are fundamentally exploratory, that is, the source from which hypotheses are formulated and tested. Other approaches to the use of focus groups trace back to the 1930's when social scientists began investigating the use of non-directive individual, e.g., focused, interviewing as they questioned the results of and limitations of closed-ended questioning (Rogers, 1942, Roethlisberger & Dickson, 1938; cited in Krueger, 1994, 7).

Merton, Fiske, and Kendall (1956/90) provided the definitive work for focus groups in their classic The Focused Interview. It was (and continues to be) used across a number of disciplines, from journalism, history, anthropology, and psychology during the next 30 years. During this period, focus groups were adapted to marketing research for evaluating television advertising. Krueger (1994) cited as a recent application his own work in education at the University of Minnesota College of Agriculture. In general, the aim is to get in touch with the consumers, and to better understand how a decision making process or attitude formation process works.

The use of focus groups has expanded among social scientists in the past decade. Morgan (1996) reported that many academic researchers have used group interviews simply because they found it more convenient to interview several people at once. This reflects a widespread misconception that group interviews were an easy "shortcut" to data collection, a way to get more data faster than conducting several individual interviews. In such cases, the researcher is generally not interested in the unique characteristics of focus group interviews; in that context this method has not been given systematic attention (Morgan 1996).

Despite increased interest in focus groups among social scientists, researchers still see the need for "borrowing" and "innovation" (Morgan 1997) to adapt this marketing tool to academic research. In fact, while the majority of the literature on the use of focus groups comes from the

field of marketing research, the widely accepted methods of applied marketing have not carried over to academic marketing research (Morgan 1996).

Unlike applied marketing researchers, who employ focus groups for both exploration and evaluation, academic users typically limit their use to exploration. The academic researcher who uses focus groups is interested in the kinds of data produced by in-depth interviews, as well as the process of negotiation among participants. The academic researcher must elicit and analyze group interaction using discourse analysis, the way language structures common sense beliefs (a level of analysis not found in applied marketing research).

Despite the greater complexity for academics, they increasingly view focus groups as a preferred research methodology. Turner et al. (1999) very recently used focus groups to study continuing inequities for professors in higher education. Ponterotto et al. (1998) used focus groups to pre-test the validity of their Teacher Multicultural Attitude Survey. Here, two groups of teachers completed the survey instrument and then discussed of the instrument and the respective items. The general response of the groups was favorable, although each group made suggestions for minor word changes that subsequently were implemented.

The Present Research

Focus groups are well-suited to the present research topic because preliminary impressions of rural economic development are that it is a highly interactive process and highly individual- or situation-specific. My purpose was to bring together a variety of individuals who have dissimilar roles in the process but seek the common goal of developing their rural area. The multiple roles represented by participants offered an opportunity to observe the interaction as one person's comments or observations stimulate reaction or perception among other participants (Morgan 1997). The issue was not to discover in depth what each individual had experienced, but to build on the interlocking architecture as orchestrated by a variety of individuals each contributing those separate, unduplicated roles. And while the level of sensitivity toward the research topic is relatively low, biases emerged which created some, but very little, reaction among participants.

Conflicting attitudes toward racial and cultural diversity, land use, and ecology might have been a shaping force in the groups, and the focus group design facilitates expression of these biases.

Protocol. I designed a somewhat flexible interview schedule of about 15 open-ended questions and prompts (Attachment 1). My purpose was to semi-structure the discussions around particular aspects of rural economic development and, after the initial two questions, the remaining questions were raised as the related topics emerged in the discussion. Within a very broad outline, this allowed the participants to elaborate on their experiences with and feelings about rural economic development. A more structured format would have presupposed too much of what the participants might say and not allow them to express themselves in their own terms. Again, candid disclosure was not an issue. In one sense, because of the diverse makeup of the participants in each group (see below), this focus group project recreated the economic development process by capturing interpersonal dynamics (Giacomini & Cook, 2000). Specifically, I wanted my participants to describe the condition of their rural economy, and to explain the meaning of "rural economic development," its goals, and its obstacles. To assure that the research would be useful to the college, a key question was how might Western Iowa Tech assist in the process of rural economic development.

Data Collection. I sought participants who were known to have an interest in or be active in matters related to rural economic development in the college district (the primary criterion). This resulted in the purposeful selection of participants all of whom had actual experience with the phenomenon (cf. Creswell, 1999). The sampling in this study provided perspectives from 'all sides' of the economic development process. I used a snowball (or chain or network) approach to sampling through which "well situated" potential participants were asked to identify other possible participants in the group interviews (McMillan & Schumacher 1997; Gall, Borg, & Gall 1996). This was a particularly useful strategy since the total group of participants does not constitute a bounded or defined group, but are somewhat scattered and have different networks that were established for different purposes. In many cases, several potential participants

recommended the same individuals. Though I did not solicit prospective participants' names from college staff, economic development staff reviewed the list and were able to identify about half of the names listed.

To garner enough participants for three separate focus groups (Morgan, 1997), 44 persons were identified as potential participants. My first contacts were usually informal telephone calls to learn if the potentials were interested in participating. This reduced the number to 29 persons who were invited by mail to participate. A few days before each group interview, I contacted each participant by telephone to confirm their involvement; this reduced the number of participants to 22, or 75.9 percent of the sample.

In April 2000, three groups of seven or eight participants met on different days in meeting rooms of small-town cafes in the region. Lunch was provided (at college expense) prior to the interviews; participants were not paid. Table 1 presents background information on the participants. All are directly involved in rural growth activities through their jobs, through elected or appointed positions, or through volunteer work. Four persons serve on town councils, one as mayor. Others are members of Chambers of Commerce, local development groups, and cultural groups.

Table 1. BACKGROUND CHARACTERISTICS OF PARTICIPANTS (n=22)

	Number	Percent
Community		
Cherokee	5	22.7%
Denison	2	9.1%
Holstein	1	4.5%
Ida Grove	2	9.1%
Larrabee	1	4.5%
LeMars	3	13.6%
Mapleton	1	4.5%
Onawa	3	13.6%
Sioux City	3	13.6%
Storm Lake	1	4.5%
Occupation		
Banking	5	22.7%
Econ. Development – Gov't.	6	27.3%
Econ. Development – Utility	3	13.6%
City Clerk	2	9.1%
Farming	1	4.5%
Small Business Owner	3	13.6%
Social Work	1	4.5%
Realty	1	4.5%
Gender		
Female	8	36.4%
Male	14	63.6%

The research team for this project included college staff responsible for planning and institutional research, coincidentally merging the disciplines of sociology and education. I facilitated the groups. I am the college's Director of Institutional Effectiveness (duties include include strategic planning, research, and institutional effectiveness) and a doctoral student at Iowa State University; my research partner is a doctoral candidate at The University of Iowa. Economic development staff at the college were only indirectly involved with the project and did not participate beyond review of the protocol.

Data Analysis. The 90-minute interviews were audio-taped, the tapes were transcribed by an independent contractor. After preliminary analysis, the data were coded using

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Nonnumerical Unstructured Data: Indexing, Searching, and Theorizing (NUD*IST), a software package for analysis of qualitative data.

The preliminary analysis was inductive, with categories and themes emerging through several readings of the transcripts and from the interview protocol (definitions, factors in development, and obstacles). Initially the transcriptions were read and re-read to identify and index themes and categories that center on particular phrases that suggest topics, or projects.

I initially identified a core of approximately ten themes by analyzing and coding each paragraph (my unit of analysis). Ultimately, I identified twenty related themes. Paragraphs were normally coded to reflect multiple themes. Inter-coder reliability was achieved by my research partner's second analysis of the material. Coding differences were rare, but where they occurred, they were resolved after some discussion.

Finally, I applied conceptual categories described by the research literature to coded data. Informed by the analytical and theoretical ideas developed during the research, these categories were further refined and reduced in number of select key themes or categories.

Results

The meaning of "rural" may vary by location and person, thus it was important to understand how the participants in this research understand it. Beginning the group interviews with discussions of the meaning of rural also ensured that participants shared at least basic understandings of the term. I present their perspectives first, as well as definitions of "rural" that appear in the rural economic research literature. From there, my findings are organized according to the framework provided by Castle (1998), with sections on natural capital, man-made capital, human capital, and finally, social capital.

Definitions of Rural

Agricultural economists and rural sociologists have long recognized that the traditional rural/urban dichotomization of American society insufficiently captures complex social geographic patterns, yet the struggle to clearly and commonly conceptualize where Americans live and work is on-going. Part of the difficulty is interdisciplinary, but more challenging is the changing nature of Americans themselves, both spatially and culturally. There is agreement, however, that "rural" and "urban" must be considered ideal types, with increasingly more Americans living, at least temporarily, somewhere in between.

The most specific and commonly accepted definition of what is rural comes from the U. S. Census Bureau (1995), broadly, "places of less than 2,500... or territory, population, and housing units not classified as urban." Probably the second most popular indicator of what is rural is based on an area's dependency upon agriculture (Drabenstott, 1996). But strict application of agricultural measures fails to capture the economic diversity and interdependence that exists in population-sparse areas (see also Castle 1998). Manufacturing, technological, and service industries long surpassed agriculture in many rural economies, and these economies are connected with areas outside rural regions.

Another way to understand what is rural is by the values held by its population. Despite the declining homogeneity of the population, rural America remains distinct from urban centers in its cultural orientation and lifestyle (Spindler & Spindler 1992). Culture is fundamentally a product of economies, which are shifting in rural regions. Yet understandings of and attitudes toward life that reflect traditional farm economy remain dominant in rural America.

Castle (1998) identified attributes of rural America that are generally accepted. Rural areas are those that are sparsely populated, interdependent with urban and global systems, and enormously diverse. I would add that they are further defined by a prevalent system of beliefs that has its roots in an agricultural lifestyle.

Defining Rural Economic Development (RED)

I presented evidence above of the evolving nature of rural America and the consequent difficulty its students confront to define it. Similarly, participants in the present research reached no consensus on the exact meaning of "rural" or "rural economic development," despite their involvement in activities related to the latter. A common response was population-based, and while no one was sure of government specifications, professional developers believed rural populations are those of less than 20,000 or 25,000. More frequently, rural is understood in relation to "urban," or what it is not: "If you are in Washington D.C., I think Sioux City is rural. If you are in Sioux City, you think of Kingsley." Another said it depends on "the prospect. They could look at [a smaller town] to be kind of almost a sub-division of Sioux City if they wanted to play up they needed the big metropolitan numbers. Or they could be rural… I could cover a lot of rural area if a company wanted to be [rural]." Rural is also a place of "bedroom communities," a place where "primary employment may be in another community."

My participants also define rural by its amenities, or, more precisely, its lack of. Amenities are largely features of infrastructure, such as transportation and communication, but also include education, financial capital, proximity to shopping and the performing arts, and access to such services as house cleaning and roofing. Rural economic development requires, in part, creating or enhancing amenities.

As a result, rural is characterized by its decline, by loss of good paying ("labor intensive") jobs, by disappearance of Main Street businesses, by lack of enthusiasm for leadership. At the same time, my participants presented the benefits of rural life in contrast to urban living: "They're tired of driving 45 miles every morning and night at 75 miles an hour. They are tired of their kids' friends carrying guns to school and all of that." Rural areas are those with "open spaces… It's a free land. You can go out and roam. And the children have the opportunity to roam." And "It's a pretty part of the state. The Loess Hills are gorgeous."

We did not produce a definitive statement of what rural is. Rather, there emerged a clear vision of a locale that offers a superior quality of life that is economically threatened and thus endangered. Various goals and perspectives for reaching those goals were offered and comprise the balance of this paper.

Natural Capital

Natural capital, defined as "part of the natural environment capable of contributing directly or indirectly to human satisfaction....by the provision of natural amenities," is the historical farm economy for the residents of the college district.

From a historical point of view, the rural economy was embodied in the farm or agricultural economy. The land and what could be produced on it provided communities with their source of commerce, with their revenue, and farm economy provided the local main street with its businessmen, bankers, business owners. Their dependence on agriculture not only determined their business cycles and their educational cycle, but it also served to transmit their culture (Oakerson 1998). In discussing the land, its uses, and their attitudes toward it, participants in the focus groups demonstrated how it was an important part of their culture.

It was common for participants to refer to the "farm base" and how, at one time, from the community standpoint in rural Iowa, that was "all they needed." One stated it, "The wealth of our people is directly tied to this resource and the biggest resource in Iowa is the land." At the same time, the geographic singularity of the Loess Hills, a unique geologic feature not conducive to typical agricultural activities, constitutes much of the land mass in two of the college counties, and that results in lower "income levels in the rural areas of western Iowa because we are ag based, and our industries are ag based, more so in western Iowa, I think, than in eastern and central. [The Loess Hills are] right smack dab through the middle of [our] territory." Their image of their own culture is slow to change, so much that even the economic developers who seem to

be in the closest touch with the trends still speak of the "agricultural base" in the present and future tense.

In effect, rural populations depended on their natural habitat for their well being, in contrast to urban dwellers (who would likely have a stronger connection to man-created capital). The farm crisis of the 1980's changed that, "since '83, when we realized we better do something. [Until then] little towns didn't have a need for economic development. REC's didn't have a need for economic development."

Natural capital, as a resource for these participants, has undergone dramatic transitions.[1] The farm is still there, but the family farm is not. "The farm base is declining dramatically. If you go to an REC annual meeting and you stand in the back, it's no offense to those with graying hair in the room but there is waves of it, you know. And there are not little kids running around. And there are not young people at these meetings in large numbers. And that is in the communities, too." The new farmer is either a corporate farmer or, in the words of a professional economic developer, "I want to be a farmer. But unfortunately it's going to be a Saturday, Sunday, and evening farmer. It's going to be, you know, 300 hundred acres is kind of a nice hobby. Not my whole life."

This reduction in the per acre income from farming and a concurrent reduction in the number of farmers living on the land in turn affects local business, for example "implement dealers" who either stopped doing business or became diversified with an expanding basis. "If our business was strictly focused on [this] county, it wouldn't work." Consequently, they expanded their lines of business and their sites to build a more diversified, stronger business.

Though agriculture is no longer the dominant sector of this economy, open spaces, the rural character of the topography, is considered a primary asset. Open spaces, for example, "set Iowa apart. That would draw people back to the rural experience," and this results in a "nice way

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[1] And this shift has affected leadership.

of life…with all the amenities" where people feel safe, with open spaces where "you can go out and roam, and the children have the opportunity to roam." They see the open spaces as a "first concern" for "people that I know who moved back from metropolitan."

Man-Created Capital

Man-created capital is defined in terms of items produced by humans. It is capable of use over time, requires some prior sacrifice of consumption, and includes "software" as well as "hardware." In terms of developing business and industry, participants expressed concerns about infrastructure, including various types of utilities and transportation. Often their references were to technological advances which have changed the way they live, work, and do business, and which may serve as a key to their future success. In one context they would see it as a means for providing a livelihood, while in another they would see it as a necessary ingredient in the mix for attracting new businesses or new inhabitants.

Infrastructure

For the participants and their communities, the most basic man-created capital is infrastructure. It not only offers the advantage of being a necessary ingredient in attracting new business, or in allowing existing business to expand, but it is also seen as a source of revenue which enables communities to progress.

One experienced developer summed it up: "It's the basics. You need the site, you need the building, the transportation, and the infrastructure." Another added the educational system as part of the infrastructure, while acknowledging that "the more rural you get, the further away you are from that pocket of resources and the tougher it becomes in putting together resources."

In terms of transportation, pending highway construction projects offers improved infrastructure. In one case, a banker noted that his community is planning ahead for those improvements "so that when that becomes a reality we are positioned for businesses to come in,

or whatever so that we can start working on acquiring land and so on." Another summed up the need and parameters for transportation:

> The differences in the projects we see are related more to transportation which may be a function of the size of the community. Sometimes it is proximity to a four lane interstate; sometimes it's the need for an airport, for commercial shipping or for a river terminal. Something like that. Typically those commercial size airports are going to be in large communities. What makes it different from one area to the next, our experience has been, it's transportation to a large degree.

Participants consistently referred to examples of communities that had assumed control of utilities, including gas, electric, and communications, to get improved service. This enduring theme was echoed at all three sites by a variety of participants who reported traveling to "model" communities to see how these communities were managing and profiting from utilities. As one banker commented,

> "We own our lights, we own our electric system.... And a cable system. We are doing it for several reasons. All of those reasons plus the non-tax revenue. And we see what that does. Ah, we are probably - - about it because I think we are going to go after the gas system. And that will be a revenue source of non-tax revenue. That will be a fight, I think. We are not sure how that... That is kind of an interesting situation to buy those. I don't know if anybody else here owns their own gas system or that sort of thing but, ah, non-tax revenue is very important. As you well know with towns like ours you can only--taxes only go so far."

Several participants reported using revenues from infrastructure to reinvestment in their own communities. As an example, one developer described how a small community of 1,800 that owns its electric utility has service comparable or better to that provided in a nearby community six times its size.

Industry

In one instance, a community that was situated on a major highway and close to a metropolitan area is able to provide the kind of support, including funding, workforce, and transportation that a local entrepreneur needed to manufacture a new trucking product. He was a local farmer who believed he could produce a vehicle better than the one he was buying. Beginning in a small facility with three employees, his business grew to employ approximately 100 people within a few years. Participants offered multiple examples of a business or industry that had been started by local entrepreneurs, and how infrastructure was an important consideration in each of those developments. In general, however, participants agreed that the challenge for most rural areas was the difficulty mustering the critical mass of capital and infrastructure to encourage and sustain new rural entrepreneurs.

Technology

Technology, especially advances in computers and wireless communications, are seen as an essential ingredient in infrastructure to the participants of the focus groups. These advances are necessary for existing businesses, necessary for education, and necessary to attract individuals to the community. In spite of the challenges of acquisition, new technologies are regarded by all participants as worth the effort.

A banker said that Internet applications are essential for the local bank to compete with on-line banking services. "Our bank serves seven small communities and must deal with five different telephone companies while providing an equal level of service to the people who live in those different communities. Our data processing center is in our main office. We are trying to get an Internet system hooked up so that we can all be on an Internet system that will connect through our main frame. [The local industry] needs to be connected at its various plants, several in Iowa as well as far away as Oregon and Kentucky." Participants mentioned examples of several retail businesses that also operate in more than one community. One participant, located in eight cities,

discussed how they coordinate inventory, financing arrangements, and sales for multiple product lines at eight sites:

> Right now we work with four different computer systems....You know we have our PC's where you have your basic Microsoft information. Then we have the software that comes from a different vendor which is strictly for dealers, because [this is] probably one of the most complex set of books for a small business, similar to car dealerships. Your basic off–the-shelf accounting software will not work for our business. We are all integrated; all our stores are connected into our mainframe and we are all networked through the phone system so we can access the [company's] computer up in [another state]. When I pay for machinery and do finance contracts, order machinery, everything, we go into their system and do it for them. All they do is audit us. We have all of our parts books on CD-rom, but the service bulletins and so forth we are hooked up via satellite... So we have a wide variety of technology that we are using for our business to function.

Participants reported that several of the small cities in the area explored ways during the past several years to acquire high-speed, wireless Internet access. Again, they reported visiting model cities:

> We are going to go to Doering City here in the next couple of weeks and look at their wireless high speed Internet and telephone system. We were over to Traer, Iowa, some of us were, a week ago, uh, a week and a half ago and looked at their up and going system.

In addition to seeing that this is an important way for their businesses to be "connected" and provide better local service, they see as an added benefit its ability to attract what one participant termed "local independent people" to their communities. Several participants offered examples.

> A friend of mine who was a computer programmer moved here. She is a technical person in ...[city name], Iowa, working for a company out of California with another branch in

Des Moines. She is able to live out here and still function as a programmer with the potential to advance, but otherwise she would have had to have left town.

I think back to the communications and technology combined together. Some of what will bring your people back to your communities, I've seen that happen in [city name], we've had two people move back in the last probably four years that are doing computer-based work. One of them works for a doctor in Des Moines, and she said that she and her husband were going to move back to the family farm. They weren't going to farm, but they were going to live on the acreage and she was going to work for a company outside of [city name] and she was just going to quit her job. And the doctor said, I don't want you to quit your job, I want you to continue to do this research for me. So she works for him over the Internet doing research and sending e-mail and all of that stuff and still has this business and is able to provide him with what he needs in Des Moines. Another person worked in Kansas City, and she told her boss that she wanted to move closer to [city name] because of her family. And she wanted that quality of life. Her kids were now pre-school age, and she wanted them to not go to school in Kansas City. And so they made an arrangement also where she does computer-based work in the home for a huge company out of Kansas City. So I think if we can provide that technology and communications in our small communities, we can get some of these people to come back and live and have that quality of life.

What we are talking about is "location independent people" that can move anywhere. One example is my cousin who lives on the old family farm where my mother was born between [two small towns], Iowa. He manages eleven or twelve specialty box factories out of the office above his garage. Took the old farmstead and spent about $125-150 thousand on rejuvenating it. He manages those from that garage with the Internet, with

technology; and he can get to the [city name] airport faster and easier than he could get to O'Hare from where he lived in Chicago.

Human Capital

Human capital refers to individuals' acquisition of knowledge, experiences, and capabilities that translate into productivity and yield individual rewards. Acquiring human capital requires foregoing other present investments and consumption in order to reap later rewards. Applied to rural economic growth, as Castle (1998) suggests, obvious human capital investments include general and specific education, and leadership development. The social rewards of these notwithstanding, strict application of the human capital concept requires an individual focus. How human capital relates to social capital is discussed in the next section of this report.

Schooling. The Iowa education system is widely acknowledged as among the nation's best, and it is a powerful resource for attracting families and industry. My participants are keenly aware of this asset, observing that one of the "cornerstones" to economic development is education. More than one participant had themselves migrated to Iowa to avoid schools in large metropolitan areas in other states.

Schooling as a human capital investment was discussed in two ways: preparation for service and for jobs. Participants more commonly discussed schooling as job preparation, and despite their pride in the quality of Iowa schools, there exists some dissatisfaction with the focus of schooling today. A theme in all three groups was the emphasis on post-secondary education for all youth:

> [Just because you] "have that four-year college degree doesn't mean you aren't [sic] going to be able to go out and get a good job. I think that degree is important. It's not always right for every single person that graduates from high school."

Observations of this nature arose from participants' frustration with labor shortages for blue-collar and service work. "It still takes people to fix things," one person remarked. And from

another in a different group, "We've got to have the support jobs. You know. People still have to flip burgers for us and whatever."

At the same time, everyone recognized that "you grow the economy by creating jobs that pay more than your local average. And if you create a job that pays less than it, you pull down your economy." Thus one participant described his town's efforts to attract "one or two people a year that could move to [the community], or somebody that is currently living [here] to use technology and get their income up there to that $75-125,000 range, that is going to kind of offset not having a plant out here making widgets." In fact, local schools and the governmental policies that support them were faulted for failing to impart the technological skills so vital to expanding rural economies.

Leadership. Schools are expected to socialize students for the workplace and for other adult roles, but according to our participants, few youth are being prepared to assume leadership roles in their communities. I found evidence of one school providing civic education. A participant reported that judging a scholarship contest "gave me a whole new faith in the youth of the next generation. Because it was tons of volunteerism. Tons of school activity." But many "kids who say 'we can make a difference'" leave Iowa and take their skills and enthusiasm with them. Several participants referred to this "brain drain, that is, that "the youth today are being educated and then taking off. And not staying and supporting."

Moreover, because of the nature of jobs available (blue-collar or service), there is a "need to build [a] new base of leaders, because it is not coming out of those traditional bases of employment." Because of the changing economic structure, there are few opportunities for adults to prepare in the workplace for leadership roles there and in the community. Or, as one man observed, "it might not be in the leadership skills but the enthusiasm for leadership… I think those skills may be there. But the 'want to' may not be." As a result, there is exists a "leadership void" in all of the communities represented in the groups, and that condition is unlikely to change "unless that part is developed, for leadership, amongst our generation."

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The dilemma facing rural communities in the economic development process is knowing how to "really reach down into the community, past that layer of elites or the caretakers who are in charge and growing up with folks. You know, the potential for leadership in the future… But how do you get the common everyday citizen to be passionate about community and economic development in their own community?"

Social Capital

What distinguishes social capital from other forms is that it consists of group arrangements that enhance individual arrangements or efforts. In a sense, this is the product of human capital expressed collectively through political, social, or voluntary organizations, either formal or ad hoc. Coleman (1990, in Castle, 1998) introduced the concept, which has been adopted by institutional economics. The concept also has been assimilated into the civic culture model by Putnam (1993; 1995), whose metaphoric title *Bowling Alone* conveys a sense of the changes in contemporary society.

Castle (1998) notes that preconditions for social capital are mutual trust, reciprocity, and an enforcement mechanism. Social structure is implied, and individuals act within that structure; however, the norms (reciprocity and trust) are not those of individuals, but those that are available as group resources and remain embedded within the social context (customs, traditions, codes of conduct). More importantly, they are included in Castle's model because they make a difference in the production of a social product. Normally, economic development focuses on attracting or supporting a new industry, or on better utilization of a natural resource. The latter is natural capital, the former is man-created. Castle suggests that if human and social capital are more visible parts of the mix, economic development will be enhanced. He cautions, however, that not all social capital is good, and that some can impede progress toward social goals. The narratives from the focus groups bear this out.

Evidence of local initiatives to capitalize social capital appeared in the very first focus group, where participants described one community's effort to recruit new leadership. "We actually solicited individuals for the council, the boards, and the chamber. We struggled to get strong persons on each board, but we wanted to make sure that we had qualified people. We meshed together the Chamber, the economic development group, and the city council…so we are all marching down the same direction."

They also discussed how regionalism, which requires cooperation, must replace localism, which inspires competition, in marketing for economic development. Participants recognized that a victory for one community in a region is indeed a victory for all. Another manifestation of the development of social capital was recounted in another part of the state where an industry joined with a college to offer incentives and training to maintain a viable workforce, because "everyone needs to have training and education behind them to work, and that is where we are finding a shortage right now." At the same time, the trends observed by Putnam throughout America were evident in some of the small communities signaled or epitomized in a lack of participation, "We are having problems…we don't have the volunteers. I mean it is really getting tough for the organizations. None of the young people are going, and then you find our chamber board. I'm on the chamber board. You can't get a quorum."

Some credit success to the program once called Tomorrow's Leaders Today, developed by Iowa State University.

> I got involved in that when it originally started in our county… and when I look back at that first group that graduated from that, we have had several on the city council members, several on the school board.
>
> "And, ah, it has taken a lot of years for people to realize it is going to take a united effort for whatever a community does. So we are, in fact, we had another meeting out this morning. And we had created a community futures planning group. And in the sit down right now we've got a committee formed. And the second part of that is, we are

creating a leadership training program. Which, ah, it is funded through the State of Iowa. And it's a three-year program. And we want to be able to develop leaders that will be able to carry this plan forward in the future."

Intersections and Tension

Though the issues confronting development in the rural economy might be assigned to one or another category of rural capital, specific challenges are seldom restricted to a discrete category. Rather, the components of rural capital overlap in obvious and very complex ways. Conditions that emphasize, for example, human capital deficiencies are typically realized in forms of social capital that are fundamental to enhancing man-created capital.

In one instance, a participant described how a regional bank (man-created) must deal with a series of individual phone companies; these transactions, however, don't work smoothly because each phone company marks its local territory, eschewing a group arrangement. Thus a customer in one location might find it 'inconvenient' to access bank services that are specific to a different location, and the bank itself finds coordination of transactions difficult.

There are too few incentives for those who are capable or willing to work collectively in leading the local companies' transformation into a regional network, an overwhelming task requiring not only technological re-structuring but changes in traditional systems of belief which value local control, even though doing so would enhance development of the area.

The intersection of capital forms is experienced daily in very practical ways across all of the communities represented by my participants. Each form is identifiable in the problems that are manifest and, on its own, present serious challenges to economic development. Taken together, finding solutions seems overwhelming:

"In our business it takes a good many years to develop a good salesman, a good parts man. And they need to have training and education behind them in order to work. And that is where we are finding a shortage right now. Is because everybody is encouraging

their kids not to be part of the ag business. Get out of the ag business. And so we are having a shortage of good mechanics. People coming out of school. And they can come out and pretty well demand the wages… And so consequently, we have to charge more in our shop. And that goes back to the farmer, you know. And his prices are depressed. Now, how come you are charging 50 bucks an hour for your labor right now? Well, because the technical aspects of the equipment and what it takes for shop equipment, and for the training of the people, and the education they have to have. And what they are demanding for a salary."

The inter-connectedness of rural capital components is further evident in perceived negative effects that an otherwise positive change in one form of capital might have on other forms. Consequently, economic development "is viewed by residents as both a blessing and a curse. New residents can increase the tax base, stimulate more local economic activity, and revitalize declining areas. On the other hand, growth also can result in higher school taxes and land values, strain the local infrastructure, as well as lead to conflict between newcomers and long-term residents." (Spain, 1983 in Kelsey 1998, 285)

Thus, one effect of rural economic development is tension between change and continuity: "There is a difference between [being] left behind and just staying behind. Lagging behind… It's a real, um, strong hesitancy to change. Make changes. Because they are afraid of some of the changes you've talked about." For example, though improved transportation was identified as a key factor in attracting economic development in rural areas, participants acknowledge that it also has potential negative effects on the community:

"We can't consider ourselves a bedroom community now. But if and when Highway 20 becomes four-lane, we could be in that distance. Because it is going to cut our time to Sioux City down to about a half an hour. And that's not very long when you are commuting to work anymore. So we have a major concern as to maintaining that downtown street. That Main Street and the downtown businesses."

Providing access out of the community is feared no more than inviting competition for labor and power into the community.

> "Even promoting within your own community is, um, it is really tough. I mean, for the people that work with economic development, the ones that are already there. And we found it out in our group. We met with the industries. And their main concern is, don't look for another business. When we want another business, we will give you a business. But don't look. Just give me people to work."

Not all tension surrounding economic development is rooted in such practical concerns. In all three groups, participants described resistance to change as a form of localism, protectionist attitudes toward traditional ways of life:

"There is a huge void, a vacuum, sometimes, of leadership. I think the distinction we see is some old leadership is still there. And in absence of new leadership, we are turning to some of those folks who don't want, uh, any kind of change. David Owen's old line about Iowans love progress but hate change really rings true in Northwest Iowa."

One participant expressed his concern that "economic development equates to urban sprawl. Is this not a concern to anyone else?" In a different group, another observed that "high on the list" of persons who move from metropolitan areas is "the rural experience," and economic development might "detract from the quality of life that would set Iowa apart.... It is almost as though we are emulating the suburban, metropolitan area. Which is, I think, what we wouldn't want to do." I asked one group if they believed that economic growth in their rural communities would threaten the very culture sought by desirable migrants, and I was told that "the basic elements will still be here, no matter which way you went on this, the old economy or the new economy... Basically, the ways, I think, it's set now. I don't think the culture would change very much."

Even advanced technology, which participants believe is an essential ingredient in the development process, is the source of tension and ambivalence. One man fears that an effect of

providing access to the world via the Internet will "dissipate that concentration within the community… make it harder for our community." The conflict he and others experience with developing their rural areas is summed up by his statement that "It is just all complicated by technology and everything else."

Conclusions

Even though fewer than half of the participants in three focus groups were not professionals in rural economic development, their implicit (although sometimes explicit) understandings of the complex interplay of the "rural capital" forms closely reflect what Castle (1998) and other researchers present in their writings about rural economic development. They witness the declining farm-based economy in their communities which is being replaced by part-time and corporate farmers, and they are intent on reducing their reliance on that traditional economic form. Their understandings of the conditions and their interrelationships necessary to facilitate that shift are presented in the model appearing as Figure 1. They recognize they must improve their infrastructures, foster local entrepreneurs, and attract new ones, primarily through technology. Schools must support this activity by imparting technological skills to their students, but also encourage youth to develop vocational and leadership skills that are in short supply. Perhaps most importantly, leadership skills must be expressed in group activities that are aimed at enhancing a shifting rural economy. The following summarizes several of the salient, recurring themes.

Preserving the rural landscape. Participants alluded frequently to the landscape and the agricultural heritage that has long been the defining characteristic of rural America. To a great extent, they continue to equate the landscape with their quality of life, the "Midwestern work ethic," and with the transmission of culture; indeed, this is a deeply held construct which accounts for much of their value system. At the same time, they recognized how the competing values embodied in economic development, with its demands for infrastructure improvements,

especially roads, conflict with concerns over conservation and land use, and with the preservation of the character of their "Main Street."

Entrepreneurs. Participants can enumerate local successes, and they are familiar with how communities had provided capital, workforce, infrastructure, and support for new business developments. They view entrepreneurs as a key to diversification; they recognize that support becomes reduced for the more remote areas; and they actively seek alliances to provide technology transfer as well as various types of technical assistance and training.

Human capital. Human capital, as it applies to individuals, describes best the concerns about who will make the future happen in rural America. Though participants expressed concerns about the outmigration of the young and the educated, they cling to the hope that some will return. Several discussed the outmigration of their own children, how it was appropriate for young people who want to try something different, though the participants were also optimistic about results from the "Come-back" programs initiated throughout the state. On the other hand, they believed that youth were too easily influenced in school to pursue the four-year college degree (which nurtures outmigration) at the expense of numerous service occupations, all of which are regarded as vital to the local economy and which, over the long term, contribute to economic well-being and fulfillment.

The participants look to local educational institutions, such as WITCC, to provide the training necessary to enhance the skills of rural workers who do remain in the area, clearly recognizing the recurring need for all to participate in the knowledge/skill spiral. Rural no longer means agricultural. Participants recognized the relationship between skilled workers and the ability to attract industry; in fact, one referred to it as the chicken-egg problem: Do better workers come first? Or is it better jobs?

Their measure of success is given with a dose of rural realism, whether talking about the relocation of former residents or "location independent persons" who prefer a rural lifestyle. They do not expect hordes, but would like to try for "two or three" a year, and that includes "footloose"

workers who are attracted to the rural lifestyle along with retirees looking for an environment that is safe, relaxed, but stimulating.

Leadership. Finally, leadership training is an important piece of the equation for developing human capital. For the communities in these focus groups, supporting leadership and change presented them most of their greatest challenges. It implies leadership training, of course, and several participants referred to programs that had operated successfully in their communities and continued to stimulate interest in service. Leadership training, however, is only part of the equation.

In their world, all of the strategies for realizing economic development -- technology, capital population, training and education, transportation, infrastructure, and support for entrepreneurs -- are realized only through leadership. Leadership becomes the single most important issue that emerged in the focus groups (see Figure 1) because local leadership, the historical prerogative exercised by many from the agricultural heritage, stands as a significant barrier to economic well-being and economic development, one that could only be overcome by replacing old leaders with new leaders. That existing power was held with a feudal grip was an unfortunate reality for many of the communities. In that respect, those who favor development look for alliances: one reported a successful drive to recruit and support new leadership; several others reported ongoing and new programs through a state university; finally, one developer reported what amounted to a *coup d'county* when computer technology was introduced as an additional inducement for the old guard to retire from public office. One lesson reinforced from these groups is that not everyone favors economic development, because, after all, economic development alters the base of power in the community.

Technology gap. Technology, a powerful force in the past century, raised productivity in agriculture and ironically diminished the importance of the family farm. Now rural communities look to technology to replace old economic forms with new, reduce the costs of doing business, alter the mix of goods and services, and shift the location of economic activity. New technologies

will enable some rural communities to capture new economic activities, such as e-commerce services.

Referred to as the digital divide where rural communities are concerned, technology is regarded by participants as an antidote for closing the distances that historically separate them from metropolitan America. A strong consensus was expressed around the need to connect rural America to the digital economy, and to raise the skills of workers and leaders to compete more effectively. In their eyes, narrowing the divide, acquiring the technology, is key not just for attracting industry but for attracting persons who make a livelihood via a knowledge based industry. The ideal, sometimes voiced by participants though they were reserved in their optimism, was attracting a knowledge-based industry itself. Though they want to proceed cautiously so as not to invest in what will be obsolete soon, they see digital technology opening up new opportunities for rural places. Finally, the added benefit is that those attracted by access to digital technology have emerged as new leaders; at least that has been the experience of several of the communities in the region.

Applications

The impetus for this research was to learn how Western Iowa Tech Community College might factor into economic development, and my participants provided clear direction. Their goals have been determined, the process articulated, and the barriers described. It is the role of the college to help reduce the barriers. It might do this in the following ways:

1. More than once, participants described the need to "get the word out" about the benefits of the community. The intended audience is not only prospective developers, but also residents of their own communities, many who resist the inevitable changes that must occur to maintain rural viability. WITCC might examine its role as participant and supporter of development activities and, where appropriate, increase its participation in economic development groups.

2. Participants supported expanded use of fiber-optic technology by which classes can be transmitted into secondary school classrooms throughout the region. Computer-related classes need to be developed for distance-learning, and offerings need to be regular. Additionally, adult education courses that teach computer skills need to be offered at times convenient to working adults.

3. Leadership presents significant challenges, both in terms of definition and delivery of services. Options might include adapting leadership curriculum to target groups, perhaps even including curriculum reworked for delivery at the secondary level (perhaps government classes) and in organizations with youthful members. Additionally, leadership presentations might be developed for delivery at work sites. This may be the most important contribution that the college could make.

4. The success of the college's vocational-technical graduates needs to be touted at the high school level. Our placement of these graduates is admirable, and the data are available as evidence. The college might work more actively with high school guidance counselors throughout the region to encourage students to pursue vocational-technical training.

5. Participants acknowledged the role of the college programs in training, as well as programs that support entrepreneurs, industry and small business. Further, participants suggested that the college expand 'second language' programs and workplace literacy, perhaps even offering work site foreign language for supervisors.

6. Community college programs that target economic development were not discussed within the focus group context.[2] In several instances, participants referred to staff from WITCC Business Services by name, though these references were within the context of lunch conversation prior to the actual taped focus group sessions. These comments were

made by economic development specialists, not by bankers nor other business participants. This suggests that knowledge of such programs is "Insider" information, that aware is relatively low-level, a condition that might be attributed, in part, to the industry-focus of most of those programs. The college might, therefore, review how these services are marketed from a delivery standpoint, as well as from the potential benefits of increased general public awareness (retail, banking).

7. Finally, the college needs to constantly network with residents of the district who are involved with rural economic development, and it needs to provide forums whereby these residents can come together to network amongst themselves. Such activities will promote the adoption of regionalism, an approach that many participants believe is vital. Participants were unanimous that these focus groups, with sharing between residents of different communities, had been a positive experience (even though this was not a goal of the process).

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[2] One reference was made to "FastTrack," but no references were made to programs such as the Iowa Jobs Training Program and the Industrial New Jobs Training Program.

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THE ROLE OF WESTERN IOWA TECH COMMUNITY COLLEGE IN RURAL ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT OF 6-COUNTY DISTRICT

Focus Group Script

OPENING QUESTION: Please tell us your name and, briefly, some background information relating to your participation in this focus group.

INTRODUCTORY QUESTION: What is the economic condition of rural northwest Iowa. (Maybe specify the six counties.)

KEY QUESTIONS:

What does the term "rural economic development" mean to you?
(Settle on some generally agreed-upon term)

How is "rural" economic development different from "urban" economic development? That is, what characteristics of rural economic development distinguish it from economic development that occurs in urban areas?

What should be the goals of rural economic development?

What do you think is the economic outlook for this area?

What are some of the (or most important) factors that contribute in a positive way to developing the economy in this area?

What are some of the (or most serious) obstacles or barriers to developing the economy in this area?

Think back to a recent project that was intended to economically enhance this area:

What was/were the goal(s)/purpose(s) of this project?
How did it get started?
Who are some of the groups or individuals involved, and what did they do?
What did you think of the project?
What was the most positive aspect of the project?
What was the most problematic?
How could the process have been improved?

What is one project that's in the process right now that might be considered an economic development project?

What are your thoughts on this?

What are some new projects that you think would be helpful in further developing your economy here?

What role can WITCC play in this and other projects?

PROBES:

How familiar are you with community college training programs?

How important is training in helping companies keep up-to-date?

What kind of help do you want/need from community colleges in developing existing employees? New employees?

How important is entrepreneurship training in regional economic development?

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